

James The Sommelier
- Wines From Lesser Known Regions - Eastern Europe

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.'

Eastern Europe

If you were asked to imagine what red liquid most typifies Eastern Europe I have no doubt that some would conjure a thick, ruby red glass of haemoglobin being drunk by a suspiciously looking dead man with worryingly long incisors. However, it is wine- not the blood of innocent farmers- that is Eastern Europe's illustrious beverage as countries such as Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria are taking a noticeable bite out of the international wine market.

The Count would have been pleased with his country's progress with wine. Romania boasts a few notable wine regions including Tarnave, Dealu Mare and Murfatlar developing a range of reds, whites and sweet wines to rival the rest of Europe. I say 'progress' because it is certainly not an emerging market sector in Romania. Wine growing has been practiced for centuries in Romania; some of the oldest vineyards date back two thousand years. Experience is definitely on their side.

Hungary could be said to be an even more prominent wine-growing region in Eastern Europe. While producing indigenous reds like the Israi Oliver and Kekfrankos, its real potential lies in its whites. Of particular note is the Sauvignon Blanc, which is said to be between Sancerre (Loire Valley, France) and New Zealand in style. Hungary's true gem, however, is the prestigious Tokaji sweet wine. Made from Aszu grape, the Tokaji Aszu is a tangy, smoky sweet wine with flavours of toffee, apricot, vanilla, orange peel and honey. As a general rule, the greater the vintage the better the bottle, as a thirty year old Tokaji will be liquorous in texture; full of soft and ripe fruit flavours; and with a lingering finish that has the richness of honey. Again, don't be fooled into thinking that this is an emerging market. Tokaji is actually one of the three oldest protected wine growing regions in the world dating back to 1730, a full 120 years before Bordeaux was first protected. So, another old-timer and with a wine like Tokaji, lauded in the Hungarian national anthem, I think the country as a whole deserves energetic support.

But it cannot all be cast in the reflection of a silver lining. This last country follows the more stereotypical view of wine heritage in Eastern Europe. Bulgaria is very much an emerging wine growing region and is still in that exciting stage where every wine can be hit or miss, no regions have a specific grape but they are all very cheap! With regards to their reds, the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are decent 'copies' of Bordeaux styles, as they are still finding their true nature. But chances are, you could go to a much more interesting country and pick up a copy of your favourite Bordeaux for under half the price.

So, three countries with wine and the tradition of wine that must, and in all fairness are beginning, to be given the recognition deserved. The added beauty - there are more: Czechoslovakia, Slovenia Poland... Whoever says the old world is incapable of diversifying had better start dicing and plating their hat.